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Strengthening of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report has been prepared pursuant to General Assembly resolution 46/182, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report annually to the Assembly and the Economic and Social Council on the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance. The report is also submitted in response to General Assembly resolution 62/94 and Economic and Social Council resolution 2007/3.

The present report describes major humanitarian trends and challenges that have occurred during the past year and analyses two thematic issues of concern: the humanitarian implications of climate change and the humanitarian challenges related to the current global food trends. The report provides an overview of current key processes to improve humanitarian coordination and ends with recommendations for further strengthening the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations.

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I. Introduction

1. The present report responds to the requests contained in General Assembly resolution 62/94 and Economic and Social Council resolution 2007/3.

II. Overview of humanitarian trends and challenges

2. During the reporting period the largest driver of disasters was the increased incidence and severity of extreme weather events, mostly associated with climate change. Nine out of every 10 disasters are now climate related. During the past year, the United Nations has issued an unprecedented 15 funding appeals for sudden-onset disasters, five more than the previous year. Fourteen of these were climate-related.

3. The humanitarian consequences of inter-State and intra-state conflicts remain high. Displacement continues to be a major source of concern. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that at the end of 2007 there were 11.4 million refugees worldwide, an estimated 26 million people displaced within their own country due to violence and persecution, and another 26 million displaced by hazard-related disasters. The figures include long-standing displaced populations in Colombia and Sri Lanka, as well as new population displacements in the Central African Republic, Chad, Iraq, Kenya, the Sudan and Somalia. In response to some of these needs, the 2008 humanitarian consolidated appeal reported that 25 million people would require humanitarian assistance at a cost of $3.8 billion.

4. Compounding the challenges of climate change and armed conflict are recent jumps in food and fuel prices which have led to violent protests in many countries. High food prices have the potential to sharply increase the incidence and depth of food insecurity. In addition to the estimated 800 million people suffering from hunger, the World Bank predicts that the food security crisis may push another 100 million people into poverty, thereby reversing progress towards the Millennium Development Goals in many countries. The crisis is having an immediate impact on the cost of humanitarian operations and will likely lead to significant additional demand for food, health and nutritional assistance, while the solutions lie in boosting investment in measures to enhance agricultural productivity. These dynamics indicate that global demand for humanitarian assistance, which is already considerable, is likely to increase in the coming decade.

A. Disasters associated with natural hazards

5. In 2007, the Centre for the Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters reported that 414 disasters associated with climate change caused over 16,000 deaths and affected more than 234 million people. Floods or storms were responsible for 86 per cent of all natural disaster deaths and 98 per cent of populations affected by natural disasters. Since 1987 climate-related disasters have increased by almost 90 per cent, while geological hazards have increased by nearly 40 per cent. Part of the increase, however, is attributed to better reporting.

6. Asia continued to be the region most affected by disasters associated with natural hazards. Eight of the 10 countries in the world with the highest number of reported disaster deaths were in Asia, with 4,234 killed in Bangladesh by cyclone Sidr in November 2007, and more than 3,000 fatalities from severe floods in Bangladesh, China, India and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. In China, millions were affected by a major earthquake measuring 8.0 on the Richter Scale which struck Sichuan province on 12 May 2008. As of 27 May the official death toll had exceeded 67,000, an estimated 362,000 had been injured and over 45 million people were affected. In Myanmar, Cyclone Nargis, which struck on 2 May 2008, has caused widespread flooding and power failures and destroyed houses, roads and markets. Some 2.4 million people are believed to be severely affected and 1.4 million are in need of urgent assistance. As of 20 May the official death toll was almost 78,000 and an estimated 56,000 were reported missing. Humanitarian actors are concerned that if affected populations are not provided with immediate life-saving assistance, the population's suffering will further increase.

7. Unusually heavy rainfall in Africa, in November 2006-March 2007 and November 2007-March 2008, led to some of the worst and most widespread flooding in the continent's recorded history. Flooding in the eastern, central and western parts of Africa killed more than 200 people, displaced over 600,000 and affected millions. The Southern African region was the worst hit. Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia hardly had time to recover from the floods of late 2006-early 2007 before they were forced to face uncommonly early, torrential rainfall and consecutive cyclones in early 2008. Those caused widespread damage to infrastructure and crops, killed thousands of livestock and affected the lives of more than a million people. This was followed by severe drought conditions, felt particularly hard in Lesotho, Swaziland, southern Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

8. Major impacts of natural hazards were also felt in Latin America and the Caribbean. For the first time in recorded history, two Atlantic hurricanes, Dean and Felix, made landfall in the same season, during August-September 2007, affecting Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua. In Bolivia and Ecuador continuous rains and flooding in March and April 2008 killed close to 100 and affected more than 700,000 people. In Bolivia, the authorities reported that some 90 per cent of key summer crops had been destroyed on land that remained underwater throughout the harvest season. In Ecuador, the flooding affected half the country's 13 provinces, triggering demands for assistance in basic services, early recovery and logistics.

9. Where they were prepared, affected communities and Governments were able to respond effectively to disasters. In Southern Africa and Asia the 2007/08 response to the rain and cyclone season saw significant improvements from previous years. Investment in early-warning systems and improved cooperation among Governments in managing the river systems have led to a dramatic decrease in the number of deaths. Preparedness measures, including contingency planning and pre-positioning of relief items, have contributed to a more timely and effective response. While in Mozambique floods of similar magnitude caused about 700 deaths in 2002, only 20 deaths were recorded in 2008. Deaths from Cyclone Sidr, which struck Bangladesh in late 2007, were far lower than the death toll in 1991 when a major cyclone killed 138,000 people. By contrast, the lack of disaster risk reduction and preparedness in Myanmar, for which Cyclone Nargis was a disaster of unprecedented magnitude, undoubtedly contributed to the very high death toll.

10. Where Governments needed and requested international assistance, the United Nations, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and non-governmental organizations were able and ready to respond. The United Nations issued a total of 20 flash appeals related to disasters in 2007/08, requesting a total of $712 million. Additionally, the United Nations deployed 15 United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) teams to help assess needs and coordinate humanitarian response.

B. Complex emergencies

11. The crisis in Darfur is now five years old, with no immediate end in sight. Almost 2.4 million people are displaced, most of whom are women and children. Sexual violence including rape remains a significant problem. Two thirds of the Darfur population require some form of humanitarian assistance. The world's largest aid operation, comprising more than 14,700 humanitarian workers, the vast majority of them Sudanese, struggles daily to cope with a difficult operating environment exacerbated by continued harassment, carjackings and targeted attacks. In Western Darfur more than 100,000 civilians were forced to flee from violence in the first few months of 2008, at a rate of 1,000 per day. Some 13,000 civilians fled into Chad in the largest single registered refugee movement in Darfur since 2004. The deterioration of the situation has highlighted the need for rapid deployment of the United Nations-African Union Hybrid Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), while there are clear threats to the historic 2005 North-South peace agreement, which ended one of Africa's longest and bloodiest wars.

12. In Iraq ongoing violence and other aid delivery challenges are preventing millions from accessing essential services. The United Nations estimates that four million Iraqis are in urgent need of food assistance and only 40 per cent of the Iraqi population has reliable access to safe drinking water. One third of the population is cut off from essential health care and necessary medication and between 4 and 9 per cent of children under five are suffering from acute malnutrition. An estimated 2.2 million Iraqis (8 per cent of Iraq's population) have fled Iraq since 2003; another 2.5 million (9 per cent of the population) are estimated to be displaced within Iraq's borders. Syria hosts the bulk of Iraqi refugees (an estimated 1.5 million), followed by Jordan (450,000-500,000). Egypt, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Lebanon and Turkey host smaller populations of Iraqi refugees.

13. In Somalia the situation has deteriorated further. Two million people are expected to be in need of humanitarian assistance or livelihood support in 2008 — an increase of more than 50 per cent from 2007. Following an upsurge in violence between the Transitional Federal Government and anti-Government elements, the United Nations estimates that since 2007, 800,000 people have fled the fighting in Mogadishu, only to be confronted with crop failure, erratic rainfall, drought, record high food prices and malnutrition levels more than 15 per cent above emergency thresholds in the areas where they have settled. In Sri Lanka the escalation of the conflict has been marked by further bombings, killings, abductions, forced recruitment and arbitrary arrests and has displaced more than 308,000 people.

14. In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the United Nations has been providing assistance to affected communities for six decades. Palestinian populations in the West Bank and Gaza as well as Israeli populations in Sderot and western Negev

continue to struggle with violence and economic restrictions. In Gaza, where close to 80 per cent of the population depends on humanitarian aid, the almost total lockdown of crossing points into the Gaza Strip since June 2007 has impeded the entry and distribution of humanitarian assistance and prevented commercial goods from entering and exiting markets. Severe restrictions on the movement of people and goods in the West Bank and Gaza have deeply affected commercial activities. The resulting economic stagnation has put nearly half of the population below the poverty line, in Gaza in particular. Civilians in Sderot and western Negev in Israel live in constant fear for their lives, as rockets and mortars continue to be fired indiscriminately from Gaza.

15. These long-standing emergencies were punctuated by political unrest in countries that had previously enjoyed relative stability. In Kenya, six weeks of rioting followed the announcement of results of the disputed presidential election in December 2007. More than 1,000 civilians were killed and 300,000 people displaced. In more than 30 countries violent riots and protests against the escalation of food prices could risk derailing critical development programmes.

16. Where the United Nations and its humanitarian partners have been able to respond to these complex emergencies, they have been effective at providing timely assistance to people in need. For example, United Nations agencies and partner organizations were able to provide safe water and sanitation to one million internally displaced persons in Somalia; cared for 240,000 Sudanese refugees and 180,000 internally displaced persons in eastern Chad; provided emergency job creation and cash assistance to 44,000 destitute families in the Occupied Palestinian Territory; delivered food to 4.1 million vulnerable Zimbabweans; distributed 12,535 blankets, 10,275 mats and 14,600 plastic sheets, to internally displaced persons in the Central African Republic; assisted 10,000 people displaced by civil strife in Timor-Leste; contained 131 epidemics in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; and drilled over 300 boreholes to provide water for war-affected people in Uganda.

17. However, in too many places humanitarian workers are denied access to needy populations and are attacked when trying to provide assistance. At a time of increasing humanitarian needs and a growing demand for humanitarian operations, the need for acceptance of and respect for the principles that underpin humanitarian action is greater than ever.

III. Humanitarian principles

18. Humanitarian action must be conducted in compliance with the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence as reaffirmed in General Assembly resolutions 46/182 and 58/114. Humanitarian actors' adherence to these principles remains critical to ensure that humanitarian assistance can be provided fairly and wherever needed. Humanity emphasizes the need to prevent and alleviate human suffering and protect life and health while ensuring respect for the individual. Impartiality requires humanitarian actors to make no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious beliefs, class or political opinions in their operations, responding on the basis of humanitarian need alone. Neutrality precludes humanitarian actors from taking sides in conflicts or engaging in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature. Independence requires humanitarian assistance to be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other

objectives. The effectiveness of humanitarian response depends on the acceptance and recognition of these principles by all relevant actors including the warring parties. Failure to apply these principles to humanitarian operations not only jeopardizes humanitarian activities, but may increase the risks for people affected by conflicts and hazard-related disasters as well as for humanitarian staff working to alleviate human suffering.

19. Humanitarian actors' access to populations in need and the ability of these populations to access assistance is a fundamental prerequisite for humanitarian operations. In complex emergencies, parties to armed conflict are expected to facilitate the safe passage of relief consignments in a rapid and timely manner. This is provided for in international humanitarian law and reiterated in several General Assembly resolutions.

20. However, access to life-saving assistance is often hindered by ongoing hostilities, restrictions on freedom of movement, banditry, looting of relief items, bureaucratic obstacles or overt obstruction of humanitarian activities. These constraints indicate lack of respect for humanitarian principles. The resulting failure to ensure rapid and unimpeded access to vulnerable populations deprives millions of civilians of much-needed relief. In Somalia the proliferation of roadblocks and checkpoints controlled by various armed actors and illegal taxation lead to significant delays in and increased costs of humanitarian assistance delivery. Increasing insecurity and overt threats to humanitarian workers made it a difficult and dangerous environment in which to operate. In Iraq, insecurity prevents international staff from supporting the provision of humanitarian assistance, while bureaucratic impediments exclude significant portions of the civilian population from basic services and assistance. The severe restriction of fuel imports into Gaza has led to the disruption of basic services and, on occasion, forced the suspension of food assistance to some 650,000 people.

21. Meanwhile, humanitarian workers are increasingly — and unacceptably — subject to deliberate violent attacks. Of growing concern are direct threats and physical assaults on humanitarian personnel by parties to conflict and criminal elements. The continued prevalence of such threats has direct implications for populations affected by conflict and in need of assistance. In Darfur, 273 security incidents were reported by non-governmental organizations in 2007,[1] including incidents in which 16 staff members suffered gunshot wounds. Robbery and banditry are of increasing concern, with car-jackings causing millions of dollars in losses and imposing severe limitations on aid groups' operational capacity. During the same period, 26 humanitarian premises were assaulted. In Afghanistan, during 2007, non-governmental organizations reported 135 security incidents, which included the killing of 15 staff members (4 international and 11 nationals), the abduction of 66 personnel and 65 armed attacks on humanitarian convoys.

22. In 2007, the Department for Safety and Security reported 520 violent attacks on United Nations personnel and the deaths of 16 staff members from malicious

[1] General Assembly resolution 60/123 called for further efforts to enhance security collaboration between the United Nations and non-governmental organizations. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) is working closely with the Department for Safety and Security and non-governmental organizations on staff security under the framework of "Saving Lives Together", a series of non-binding recommendations to enhance the security of humanitarian operations.

attacks in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Guatemala, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Malawi, the Sudan, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste and Uganda. Locally recruited humanitarian and United Nations personnel remain particularly vulnerable and have suffered the majority of casualties, arrests and incidents of harassment. Fifteen of the 16 deaths reported by the Department for Safety and Security were of locally recruited staff. In Darfur and the Democratic Republic of the Congo access restrictions caused by safety and security concerns are compounded by ongoing fighting, the breakdown of chains of commands within armed movements and banditry, which jeopardize the safety and security of humanitarian actors. In Darfur, road banditry has increased by 350 per cent compared to 2007. In the first quarter of 2008, 96 vehicles were hijacked including three UNAMID vehicles and 60 trucks contracted by the World Food Programme (WFP). In April 2008 WFP was forced to reduce monthly food portions by 50 per cent. This will reduce the daily kilocalorie value of the ration by 40 per cent and prevent sufficient stocks of food relief from reaching needy populations. Governments are urged to take all necessary steps to ensure the safety and security of humanitarian personnel operating within their borders. Public acknowledgment of their impartiality and their positive role is an important step in this direction.

23. A growing challenge to the application of humanitarian principles is the increasingly blurred distinction between military and humanitarian civilian actors. This is most evident in countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq, where humanitarian workers operate in close proximity with armed forces and military actors provide humanitarian aid. While the importance of civil-military communication and coordination channels is well recognized, it remains vital to the effectiveness of humanitarian operations that the distinction between humanitarian and military purposes and actors be strictly maintained. Within the United Nations, important steps have been taken to promote a unified system-wide response in complex emergencies while maintaining appropriate organizational and structural arrangements that allow humanitarian actors to work in a principled manner. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee has developed a series of guidelines on the relationship and interaction between humanitarian and military actors such as the IASC reference paper on civil-military relationships in complex emergencies, the guidelines on the use of military and civil defence assets to support United Nations humanitarian activities in complex emergencies and the guidelines on the use of military and armed escorts for humanitarian convoys. The United Nations, in consultation with Member States and military actors, will continue its efforts to ensure that civil-military guidelines are broadly disseminated, well understood and respected by all actors involved.

24. Humanitarian actors must consistently distinguish themselves from other actors in the field. To this end, organizational and structural arrangements conducive to independent humanitarian action are a fundamental prerequisite where humanitarian actors are operating alongside political and peacekeeping missions. In this regard, United Nations humanitarian actors have continued to strengthen coordination with peacekeeping operations. Additionally, several codes of conduct have been developed to guide the behaviour of humanitarian actors in line with humanitarian principles. The Secretary-General's bulletin on special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (ST/SGB/2003/13) provides an example of these codes. The bulletin reiterates the zero tolerance policy for abuse and exploitation and the humanitarian community's obligation to support the

victims. These guidelines must be continually reaffirmed and renewed in order to promote accountability to fundamental principles in the face of complex and evolving operational contexts.

IV. Emerging humanitarian challenges

25. The most notable humanitarian developments of the reporting period revolve around the humanitarian impact of climate change and of the global increase in food prices. These phenomena have led to increased humanitarian needs and pose unique challenges to response capacity.

A. Humanitarian implications of climate change: challenges for disaster risk reduction and preparedness

26. During the past 20 years, the number of recorded disasters has doubled from approximately 200 to more than 400 per year. Disasters caused by floods are more frequent (increasing from about 50 in 1985 to more than 200 in 2005) and damage larger areas than they did 20 years ago. What we are witnessing today should not be considered an aberration. Current trends indicate a future where extreme climate variability and its consequences are likely to become the norm.

27. The humanitarian implications are significant, including more frequent and intense storms and rising sea levels, both of which increase the risk of flooding. Nearly 634 million people — one tenth of the global population — live in at-risk coastal areas a few metres above existing sea levels, three quarters of which are located in the Asian flood-prone river deltas or in low-lying small island States. Almost two thirds of cities with populations greater than 5 million fall, at least partly, in low-lying flood-prone areas. Twenty-one per cent of the urban populations of least developed nations live in such environments.

28. Climate change will increase climatic extremes and the likelihood and geographic range of drought. It impacts agriculture production and food systems, thereby increasing the number of people at risk of hunger. In some African countries rainfall-fed agriculture is projected to halve by 2020 and desertification is engulfing larger areas of the Sahel region, owing in part to an increasingly arid climate, decreased rainfall and extended periods of drought. Many communities in the Sahel are dependent on land for agriculture and pastoralism; desertification and subsequent food insecurity will increase their vulnerability. Approximately 200 million people in Africa (25 per cent of the continent's population) currently do not have access to clean water. The number is expected to grow by 50 million by 2020 and to 400 million by 2050. In 1995, nearly 1.4 billion people (24 per cent of the global population) lived in high-stressed watersheds where water demand outstripped supply. By 2025, this figure is projected to rise to over 3 billion based on population growth alone.

29. Increased flooding is leading to higher rates of waterborne diseases, and rising temperatures have increased the likelihood of malaria epidemics in Africa. Unless protective measures are strengthened, climate change will expand the range of diseases such as dengue fever, exposing an additional 2 billion people to transmission by the 2080s. In 2000, the World Health Organization (WHO)

estimated that global warming was responsible for 150,000 deaths, as any increase in global temperature will increase fatalities. Climatic extremes may exacerbate the struggle for access to and control of scarce resources which could lead to population displacement and armed conflict. Given vulnerability patterns, droughts and floods will increase the risk of short-term, temporary migration. Climate change may also exacerbate longer-term migration trends associated with environmental degradation and desertification. This points to the need for strengthened protection mechanisms for disaster-affected populations, as well as improved coordination between humanitarian and development actors to reduce the potentially negative impact of longer-term migration trends.

30. Initial analyses of the links between climate change and increasing food prices are under way. At a time when global food stocks are at an all-time low, food supply could be further diminished by extreme weather events that trigger harvest failures and changes in weather and temperature that alter agricultural production patterns. In 2006/07 a year's worth of wheat was lost to drought in Australia, and cold weather caused grain crops to fail in Europe and the United States of America. Climate change may also impact food security, as changing crop yields may continue to drive up prices for basic food commodities in food-importing countries.

31. The immediate challenge posed to humanitarian organizations by climate change is how to prepare for and respond to these more frequent and intense climatic events. There is an urgent need to increase investment in disaster risk reduction and preparedness in high-risk settings and to mobilize support for addressing the humanitarian impacts of climate change. In the immediate future, these efforts must focus on risk areas such as storms, floods and droughts, while taking into account the longer-term impacts such as rising sea levels. Data and analysis of the humanitarian implications of climate change remain in their early stages. Humanitarian actors are increasingly engaging with the World Meteorological Organization and climate scientists to see how current national and regional climate modelling and weather forecasting can best be incorporated into early warning systems and used to improve disaster preparedness and response. Governments are encouraged to strengthen their preparedness for disasters, in particular their legal frameworks, including through the implementation of the Guidelines for the Domestic Facilitation and Regulation of International Disaster Relief and Initial Recovery Assistance, adopted by the thirtieth International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in November 2007.

32. While increasing the humanitarian community's knowledge of hazards is critical, improving the understanding of how climate hazards affect existing patterns of vulnerability and risk is equally important. For this reason, humanitarian actors are increasingly considering how risk profiles and tools can be updated to provide a more comprehensive analysis of vulnerability caused by climate change. Factors such as changes in morbidity patterns, access to food and water, urbanization, capacity of current infrastructure and potential migration patterns are central components of the analysis. Progress on this issue was the development of the Bali Action Plan agreed at the 2007 United Nations Climate Change Conference. The plan emphasized the need for improved vulnerability assessments, capacity-building, response strategies, insurance and disaster risk reduction strategies, as well as closer consideration of the specific needs of African countries affected by drought, desertification and floods.

B. Humanitarian implications of global food trends

33. A substantial increase in food commodity prices combined with diminishing food stocks is having a major impact on food security and humanitarian aid globally. Since mid-2007, United Nations agencies have reported food commodity cost increases ranging from 30 to 130 per cent. Drivers of increasing prices can be divided into demand-related and supply-related factors. Demand-related factors include global population growth and changing food consumption patterns, often towards diets richer in meat and dairy. A large increase in biofuel production has led to increased demand for commodities such as maize and palm oil. Preliminary evidence indicates that strategies of institutional investors in commodity markets may also be contributing to higher prices and price fluctuations. An important supply-related driver is the fact that the world's food reserve stocks have dwindled to their lowest level in 30 years, because of a belief that food would remain plentiful and available at a relatively low price. Increased costs of fertilizer and fuel have also contributed to rising food prices.

34. Preliminary predictions indicate that current food trends will create serious humanitarian challenges in the immediate, medium and long terms. The most alarming immediate consequence is the increased incidence of social and political food-related unrest in a large number of countries, which, as already observed in 2008, has the potential for political instability. This risk is particularly high in countries emerging from violent conflict, where fragile security, political and economic progress is easily derailed. In some cases, United Nations stabilization efforts could be undermined, as peacekeeping missions come under pressure to support Government efforts to quell riots and humanitarian staff and their facilities become targets. Apart from the immediate security response, urgent efforts are needed to monitor food markets and prices (especially in urban areas), factor food-related unrest into conflict early warning systems and integrate food security into peacebuilding and contingency plans.

35. Meanwhile, food assistance has become more expensive. To maintain current levels, additional funds are being needed to cover food and transport costs. WFP recently requested an additional $755 million to meet the cost of its already assessed projects for 2008. While the response to this appeal has been generous, significant extra resources are likely to be required as many of those who depend on external food assistance may face a reduction of rations.

36. National reactions to food price hikes vary. Most food-importing countries have reduced or eliminated import tariffs and taxes, an action whose fiscal implications still need to be assessed. Budget cuts affecting Government development programmes could have long-term consequences for food security and poverty. Many food-exporting countries have imposed export tariffs and quotas to reduce domestic prices, or banned exports altogether. A few countries are making purchases to replenish stockpiles and strategic reserves, while others are increasing subsidy levels or examining the possibility of rationing. Governments should be cautious to avoid the possible impacts of such policies including their potential to exacerbate shortages, further raise prices in importing countries or reduce production incentives.

37. Finally, one of the most serious challenges may be a greater incidence and depth of food insecurity, requiring emergency interventions. While anecdotal

evidence is emerging from developing regions about the impact of higher food prices on people, there are no global estimates yet of how many people may become hungry. Though it is difficult to establish thresholds for food insecurity and account for coping strategies, there are multiple signs of distress on the part of the poorest households — which are mostly female-headed — such as selling assets, eating less and eating worse. The United Nations system must urgently improve needs assessments and vulnerability analysis while working with Governments to develop effective safety nets (in the form of food, vouchers or cash transfers; school feeding, employment and nutrition programmes; insurance schemes, etc.) to protect vulnerable populations.

38. At the national level, Governments need to dedicate more resources to boosting agricultural production and strengthening social safety net programmes to stabilize the provision of food and nutritional support, health care and emergency education. Safety nets can mitigate the long-term impact of food price increases such as malnutrition, prevent distress asset sales and allow increased investment in health and education. Measures, including local procurement of food supplies and cash transfers, should be established to help Governments and food agencies to boost their emergency operational capacity. These national-level programmes should be underpinned by market analysis to ensure that local procurement and cash transfers do not make food even more inaccessible to the poorest groups who fall beyond safety-net coverage.

39. It remains imperative that Governments, communities and international agencies become better equipped to provide longer-term solutions to new patterns of hunger. This will require strengthened United Nations coherence and partnerships with Governments to enhance national capacities to address hunger and ensure food security. Food and agriculture agencies are taking steps to mitigate the implications of cost increases, including by purchasing food commodities in local and regional markets. WFP is currently purchasing 80 per cent of its food supplies from developing countries to reduce delivery costs and support local economies. However, there is an increasing risk that further expansion in local purchases may be impeded by the export bans imposed in many countries. At the global policy level, additional resources must be allocated to research the implications this trend and find ways to mitigate its adverse impacts at all levels.

40. Given the urgent need for action and policy support at the global and country levels, an international strategy is needed that outlines coherent and coordinated responses to rising food prices. In May 2008, the Secretary-General established a high-level task force on the global food security crisis, which comprises relevant United Nations agencies and Bretton Woods institutions. The task force will aim to develop a comprehensive framework for action that defines common strategies in support of authorities and affected populations. The response will include key immediate and long-term actions, policies and resources and address a wide range of food security issues. Humanitarian actors will play a central role, particularly in the short term.

V. Ongoing challenges

A. Strengthening the coordination of humanitarian assistance

41. In 2006 the United Nations launched a series of initiatives aiming to further enhance the coordination of its emergency humanitarian response by increasing capacity, capability, predictability, accountability and equity in humanitarian action. These initiatives focused on four areas: capacity and coordination in the field; leadership; partnerships; and predictable and equitable humanitarian financing.

Capacity and coordination in the field

42. Capacity and coordination in the field were strengthened through the implementation of the cluster approach,[2] which was developed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee to address identified response gaps. Under the cluster approach, thematic leads have been designated for areas that previously had no clear lead organization. The approach has contributed to enhanced coordination, decision-making and partnerships among humanitarian actors, both in the field and globally.

43. During the reporting period, the cluster approach has been implemented in 12 out of 26 countries where resident and humanitarian coordinators are in place. This number will increase in 2008 as more coordinators introduce the cluster approach to improve coordination in preparedness exercises and ongoing emergency response operations. In Pakistan and Mozambique the approach was used for the second time in response to floods. The cluster approach was immediately implemented in Myanmar following Cyclone Nargis. An independent evaluation conducted in 2007 indicated that clusters have successfully addressed response gaps and improved strategic planning and preparedness at the field level. The evaluation, however, identified the need to better mainstream gender, HIV/AIDS, environmental concerns and early recovery and to strengthen the clusters' accountability to stakeholders, including national Governments and beneficiaries. To further support the global humanitarian response capacity, an appeal was launched in 2007 requesting $63 million. To date, only 53 per cent of that amount has been raised.

Enhanced humanitarian coordination: the resident and humanitarian coordinator system

44. More effective humanitarian leadership at the field level — whether the function is performed by resident or humanitarian coordinators — is critical to an enhanced and accountable humanitarian response. Effective humanitarian coordination requires qualified individuals who provide leadership during humanitarian emergencies. Efforts to strengthen this function face the following challenges: the pool of potential humanitarian coordinators is narrow; opportunities for coordinators to share experiences and best practices are limited; and the accountability framework for humanitarian coordinators requires further development.

[2] The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is not taking part in the cluster approach. Nevertheless, coordination between ICRC and the United Nations will continue to the extent necessary to achieve efficient operational complementary and strengthened response for people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence.

45. To address these weaknesses, in 2007 the Inter-Agency Standing Committee developed and began to implement a three-year work plan. The progress achieved includes: a standardized induction programme for newly appointed humanitarian coordinators; enhanced accountability through better identification of joint humanitarian priorities between the Emergency Relief Coordinator and humanitarian coordinators; and a mentoring system for newly appointed humanitarian coordinators. Additional system-wide efforts are ongoing to strengthen performance appraisals for humanitarian coordinators.

Predictability of response: humanitarian financing

46. Strengthened leadership capacity should be supported by sufficient and flexible funding to meet urgent humanitarian needs. The humanitarian system has established several mechanisms to improve the speed, equity and predictability of humanitarian financing. These humanitarian "pooled funds" comprise the Central Emergency Response Fund at the global level and the common humanitarian funds and emergency response funds at the field level. Complemented by a strong Consolidated Appeal Process that allows for the identification and prioritization of humanitarian needs by all stakeholders, these funding mechanisms can be highly effective in facilitating rapid and needs-based humanitarian response.

47. Pooled funding mechanisms have seen significant success. Donors have pledged $1.1 billion to the Central Emergency Response Fund since its inception. During two years of operation, the Fund has committed $708.9 million to 879 projects in 60 countries. A two-year evaluation of the Fund — as mandated by the General Assembly — is currently under way. The Secretary-General will report on the evaluation findings to the General Assembly at its sixty-third session. Donors have committed $330 million to the common humanitarian fund in the Sudan, and nearly $300 million in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. During 2008, common humanitarian funds will be established in Ethiopia and the Central African Republic. While these funds have provided humanitarian/resident coordinators with tools to enhance humanitarian coordination and allocate funds based on needs, additional efforts are still required to improve prioritization and allocation of resources. A series of efforts — including training, coaching and enhanced guidelines — has been undertaken to improve the decision-making processes. Developing improved performance and accountability frameworks, in addition to needs analysis frameworks and tools, will enhance the use of these funds.

Equity and accountability of response: enhancing needs assessments

48. A common analytical framework that allows humanitarian stakeholders to jointly determine humanitarian needs and priorities is important to ensuring timely, accountable and equitable provision of humanitarian assistance. In consultation with other United Nations partners, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has begun a mapping of ongoing assessment initiatives in an effort to develop a global needs assessment framework that provides for the joint collection and use of data. This framework will include definitions, key indicators, information management mechanisms and data collection methodologies that can be used by humanitarian actors, donors and Governments.

Partnerships

49. The Global Humanitarian Platform brings together humanitarian organizations from within and outside the United Nations system to identify ways to strengthen humanitarian partnerships. Its goal is to enhance the effectiveness and coordination of humanitarian assistance and strengthen the capacity of local non-governmental organizations. At its second meeting, in 2007, the Platform endorsed the principles of partnership, namely equality, transparency, result-oriented approach, responsibility and complementarity. At its next meeting, to be held in July 2008, the Platform will discuss how the principles are being translated into practice, for example in the context of the current rise in global food prices.

B. Foreign military assets in disaster relief

50. During the reporting period and at the request of Member States, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs commissioned an independent study on the use of foreign military assets in disaster relief. Completed in late 2007 and launched in early 2008, the study reported that foreign military assets are a common feature of major international disaster relief operations. The findings of the study indicate that while humanitarian relief is — and should remain — a predominantly civilian function, foreign military assets can play a valuable role in disaster relief operations. Given the predictions about the impact of climate change, the use of foreign military assets may increase in the future.

51. The study defined foreign military assets as military personnel, equipment and services provided by Governments with the consent of the affected State for major international disaster relief assistance. The study found that air transport was the most frequently deployed asset, followed by medical support and expert personnel for civil-military coordination, needs assessments and logistics. The study identified FMA contributors as mostly countries in North America and Europe, who provided assistance to distant and neighbouring countries, while many countries in most regions had contributed FMA to assist their neighbours in disaster relief.

52. Following a major hazard event, several factors will influence a Government's decision to request or offer military assistance: the scale and humanitarian impact of the disaster; the level of preparedness of the affected country; countries' policies on accepting military assets or making them available for disaster relief; national interests; and diplomatic and historic relations. Countries affected by natural disasters usually turn first to their neighbours for assistance because of the proximity of their assets and a likely understanding of their operational context. Most deployments of foreign military assets in disaster relief are a result of direct, bilateral negotiations between Governments or their national militaries, based on established relationships, though a few countries have policies against the deployment of foreign forces on their territories for various reasons. Regional multilateral frameworks and other methods of coordinating the deployment and use of military assets have recently been explored, such as the Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency. Foreign military assets are rarely provided through the United Nations.

53. The study found that bilateral channelling of military assets led to a lack of coordination and occasionally overloaded the affected country's ability to use the

assets effectively. Regarding the role of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the study recommended a review of its coordination role with a view to identifying ways in which it can add value to what is likely to remain a system dominated by bilateral relationships. For example, the Office might help Governments' management of foreign military assets by improving the ability of resident/humanitarian coordinators to assist Governments in determining the need for such assets and their effective use. UNDAC teams might include more civil-military liaison experts, and military actors might be invited to participate in joint humanitarian needs assessments. A reassessment of the central register of military and civil defence assets is another concrete step that might be taken in this regard.

54. The study reaffirmed the need for Governments to deploy foreign military assets in an effective and principled manner and the importance of existing international guidelines on this issue, particularly the Oslo Guidelines adopted in 1994 and updated in 2006, which it identified as the international normative and practical framework for the use of foreign military assets in disaster response. The Oslo Guidelines stipulate that all humanitarian assistance must be provided in accordance with the core principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality and with full respect for the sovereignty of States. They reiterate that assistance should be based on actual needs and delivered by impartial and neutral actors, ensuring access to vulnerable populations and contributing to their safety. The study acknowledges that adherence to the Guidelines becomes particularly important when international disaster response is required in a complex emergency.

55. The study identified a considerable lack of awareness of the Guidelines among the different stakeholders and an uneven application of the Guidelines, particularly the concept of "last resort" which stipulates that military assets should be requested only when there is no comparable civilian alternative and when it meets a critical humanitarian need. The military assets must therefore be unique in capability and availability. There continues to be disagreement among Governments and humanitarian actors about how to balance the unique capabilities of military assets against the cost burdens, potential militarization of the situation and the effects of the presence of foreign troops on humanitarian actors' ability to operate. The study highlighted the need to raise awareness of the Oslo Guidelines more widely and to ensure that civilian and military actors discuss lessons and best practices following individual disaster relief operations. The experience following Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, where the Government declined all offers of foreign military assets despite the dramatic urgency of the situation, illustrates that this remains a very sensitive area.

Effectiveness of using foreign military assets in disaster response

56. In assessing the effectiveness of foreign military assets, the study highlighted that the timeliness of deploying them and making them operational appears to be the major factor. This depends on the availability of assets, the proximity of the provider, the reliability of information and bureaucratic processes. Poor information sharing and lack of clarity over status-of-forces agreements can cause significant delays. Clear national policies and the development of standing agreements between the contributing country and the agency coordinating the relief effort can significantly minimize the delay between the signing of any status-of-forces agreement, dispatch and operation.

57. The appropriateness of foreign military assets to the tasks at hand was also highlighted. Comprehensive, unified needs assessments and coordination frameworks could potentially ensure that appropriate military assets are provided. The length of deployment of foreign military assets, the sustainability of their relief efforts, perceptions and the nature of the emergency situation are additional factors that define their appropriateness. The efficiency with which foreign military assets operate and complement the relief effort; the absorptive capacity of the affected country, its ability to accommodate and effectively use foreign military and other disaster relief assets; and the coordination of the relief effort, including between civilian and military assets, are elements further impacting the effectiveness of foreign military assets.

58. The cost-effectiveness of foreign military assets is a source of concern for provider Governments who believe them to be costly and for humanitarian actors who fear the burden of the assets' costs on humanitarian funding. The Oslo Guidelines stipulate that the costs of deploying foreign military assets should not be borne by the affected Government and should be provided independently of funds earmarked for humanitarian relief assistance. The costs associated with foreign military assets are not readily available. It is, therefore, difficult to determine the effects of foreign military assets on humanitarian aid budgets. Several providers have introduced internal measures to ensure that the costs incurred in providing foreign military assets do not impact humanitarian funding sources. Cost-effectiveness is not only an inappropriate criterion to assess the efficacy of foreign military assets, but may also be a difficult factor given that costs are incomparable and may not be borne by humanitarian organizations. Furthermore, cost-effectiveness is a difficult argument to make when lives are at stake.

59. Measuring the effectiveness of the deployment, use and disengagement of foreign military assets in disaster relief depends upon the interplay of all the above factors. The decision to deploy military assets and the selection of the methods and types of assets to be deployed should be primarily based on humanitarian principles, identified humanitarian needs, the interests of the affected country and communities and the added value of foreign military assets to the overall relief effort.

C. Integrating a gender perspective in humanitarian assistance: review of the 1999 policy statement of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee

60. The significance of mainstreaming gender equality in humanitarian operations to ensure a more effective response has been increasingly recognized by policymakers and practitioners. In 2006, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee launched a five-point strategic plan guided by its 1999 gender policy statement, subsequently leading to an updated Committee policy on gender equality in humanitarian action which was endorsed in May 2008. Additionally, the coalition "United Nations Action against Sexual Violence in Crisis" was launched in 2007 to harmonize the United Nations system's response to sexual violence in emergencies. It comprises 12 United Nations entities and supports field-level activities in several countries, including the Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

61. The 2007 IASC gender policy review indicated that progress has been achieved. For example, a gender handbook was published to guide humanitarian

actors in ensuring that the different needs of women, girls, boys and men are addressed. Eleven gender advisors have been deployed to the field as part of a newly created gender capacity roster to support gender mainstreaming in country-level programming. Preliminary evaluations indicate that gender capacity rosters can significantly improve humanitarian response.

62. The policy review called for enhanced coordination among humanitarian actors in gender equality programming, including ensuring the equal participation of women, girls, boys and men in all aspects of humanitarian response. It is also fundamental to gender equality to ensure that women and girls are provided with equal opportunities for capacity-building and employment. It is imperative that humanitarian actors report sex- and age-disaggregated data to better inform decision-making, and that accountability mechanisms for mainstreaming gender equality be strengthened.

VI. Conclusions and recommendations

63. Member States and humanitarian actors, both within and outside the United Nations system, are faced with complex challenges that suggest increasing demand for humanitarian assistance. Trends such as the increased incidence of climate-related disasters and the continued rise in global food prices are likely to increase communities' vulnerability. These trends require strengthened humanitarian response with enhanced coordination at all levels, as well as greater respect by all stakeholders of the humanitarian principles that underpin humanitarian assistance.

64. On the basis of the above, Member States are encouraged to consider the following:

(a) All actors engaged in the response to complex emergencies and natural disasters should be strongly urged to promote greater respect for the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence;

(b) Access to vulnerable populations and the safety and security of humanitarian personnel should be recognized as prerequisites for effective humanitarian response. States are urged to facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian personnel and relief consignments to populations in need;

(c) Appropriate steps need to be taken by the authorities concerned to ensure the safety and security of humanitarian personnel operating within their borders. Authorities should refrain from public statements that jeopardize the safety and security of humanitarian workers;

(d) Risk reduction and preparedness measures against disasters should be developed and strengthened at all levels, in coordination with relevant actors and in accordance with priority five of the Hyogo Framework for Action[3] (preparedness for response);

(e) Member States and regional organizations are encouraged to strengthen operational and legal frameworks for international disaster relief through the continued implementation of internationally recognized guidelines, including the

[3] A/CONF.206/6 and Corr.1, chap. I, resolution II.

Guidelines for the Domestic Facilitation and Regulation of International Disaster Relief and Initial Recovery Assistance;

(f) Greater efforts are required to intensify research to improve empirical data and analysis, in order to better understand the humanitarian consequences of climate change;

(g) The work of the Secretary-General's high-level task force on the global food security crisis should be strongly supported, so as to improve access to food by vulnerable populations, in particular children, enhance agriculture productivity and strengthen the development of food market monitoring systems;

(h) Increased resources need to be made available to meet current global humanitarian challenges such as climate change and increasing food prices. Humanitarian funding mechanisms such as the Central Emergency Response Fund, common humanitarian funds and emergency response funds could usefully be utilized in order to ensure predictable, timely and needs-based access to resources;

(i) The provision of military assets for disaster relief, based on humanitarian considerations, in accordance with the Oslo Guidelines and in full respect of the humanitarian principles, is encouraged. It should be ensured that internationally recognized guidelines on civil-military coordination such as the Oslo Guidelines are broadly disseminated, including through improved training;

(j) The United Nations and humanitarian partners should ensure that all aspects of humanitarian response address equally the needs of women, girls, men and boys, including through the improved collection, analysis and reporting of sex and age disaggregated data.